

War Bikes

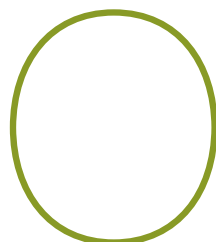
Story by SFC Lisa Gregory



Originally used by frontline couriers, motorcycles ultimately took on a range of military tasks — including widespread service with military police units.



Motorcycles have played an enduring role in American military operations since the Army enlisted its first two-wheeled cycle before World War I.



NE hundred years ago four men watched as their dream, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle,

rolled out of a little wooden shack in Milwaukee, Wis. Thanks to good timing and the rugged capability of such two-wheeled machines, Harley — along with motorcycles from such other companies as Indian in America, BMW in Germany and Triumph in Great Britain — have played an enduring role in military transportation.

The Army began using motorcycles as early as 1913, and in 1916 the Harley-Davidson Motorcycle Company's product became the vehicle of choice for GEN John J. Pershing's pursuit of Pancho Villa. By 1917 roughly one-third of all Harley-Davidson motorcycles produced were sold to the U.S. military.

Meanwhile, European armies had begun using fast and agile motorcycles as reconnaissance and messenger vehicles, and even as ambulances. Many motorcycles used during World War I were equipped with special sidecars mounting machine guns. By the

time America entered the war, the motorcycle was widely used in combat, communications and transportation.

The Army used an estimated 20,000 motorcycles during the war. In fact, the first American to enter Germany after the ceasefire was reported to be motorcycle dispatch rider CPL Roy Holtz.

As America prepared to enter World War II, Harley Davidson again answered the call by producing a motorcycle to withstand the harsh

African deserts. But, by the time production was completed on the bike, U.S. forces had moved through Africa and the motorcycle was slowly being replaced by the jeep.

The Germans continued to benefit from the maneuverability of military motorcycles and gave them a new mission, that of tactical assault, something the United States would



At various times in the nation's military history — including Operation Desert Storm — motorcycles have been used in areas where roads were impassable or nonexistent.



Maneuverability and speed continue to make motorcycles an important mode of military transportation.

use again in later conflicts. In all, Harley Davidson produced some 90,000 military motorcycles during the war.

At the end of the war many veterans focused on returning to society. Many felt a need to recapture the thrill they felt during the war as members of tank units or bomber crews. One veteran, Willie Forkner, an avid motorcyclist before the war, decided to create a motorcycle club. And so began the era of the “outlaw biker.”

These riders were thrill seekers


and were considered to be menaces by some. A biker stereotype became the basis for biker movies, magazines and even clothing lines, which resembled military uniforms.

In the 1960s motorcycles were used by special forces troops in Vietnam. After the war America again saw returning veterans taking to the streets on their two-wheeled machines. In 1988 the veterans decided it was time to ride for a purpose. A motorcycle caravan called “Rolling Thunder” rolled into Washington, D.C., that Memorial Day weekend to bring attention to the plight of those American service members still

missing from the Korean and Vietnam wars. Each year since then, hundreds of thousands of people have ridden through the nation’s capital and met at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to pay homage to those who didn’t return.

Military motorcycles again appeared in a combat zone in 1991, seeing service during Operation Desert Storm. The vehicle’s ability to keep going, even after the road ends, was an important factor in Afghanistan, as it is today in Iraq, where the terrain doesn’t always allow access for heavier, four-wheeled vehicles.

Along with their original missions of reconnaissance and carrying dispatches to the front, the Army has used motorcycles to move small amounts of medical supplies to the front lines when heavier vehicles couldn’t make it.

The compact maneuverability and speed of these two-wheeled vehicles continue to make them an important mode of military transportation, and an evolving part of military history. 



First used by Army scouts, motorcycles are still a popular mount for reconnaissance troops. Here, scouts head out during a 1988 maneuver in Korea.

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